

At-a-Glance

KEY ISSUE

The Alabama Reading Initiative is unique among state efforts to address student reading difficulties because it includes a focus on high school students and does not depend on federal funding.

Primary Finding

States must be responsive to the different needs of secondary and elementary students and schools when implementing a reading initiative ... a one-size-fits-all approach to reading won't work.

TAKE - AWAYS

State Level

- Create a K–12 continuum for reading.
- Intensive Reading Programs should be available at the secondary level in addition to literacy-across-the-curriculum initiatives.
- Provide secondary teachers with support from specialized staff such as literacy coaches.

Sustaining Focus on Secondary School Reading: Lessons and Recommendations from The Alabama Reading Initiative

by Amy Bacevich and Terry Salinger of the American Institutes for Research

THE CHALLENGE

Far too many high school students are limited by low levels of literacy. This problem impacts learning in all subjects because literacy is key to unlocking content knowledge across the curriculum. As the level of literacy improves, so do the chances that a student will master more rigorous coursework, be able to demonstrate that mastery, and be better prepared to attend college or meet today's challenges at work. Remarkably, about a quarter of all 8th and 12th grade students read "below basic," meaning they cannot identify the main idea of what they read.¹ As many as one-half to three-quarters of ninth-graders in low-performing high schools start their freshmen year with significant reading difficulties, lacking the skills needed to comprehend complex texts assigned in their content courses.²

For those who never make it to the 12th grade, the inability to read well contributes to decisions to drop out of high school. These low literacy rates are most pervasive among minorities and students from low-income households. Because reading is not typically taught in secondary school, there are far too few teachers appropriately prepared to teach reading at the high school level.

THE CONTEXT

Boosting literacy in high school, as envisioned under the No Child Left Behind Act, is an important aspect of accelerating student learning in high schools and helps states meet accountability requirements related to graduation rates. Focusing on the specific literacy needs of students with disabilities as well as English Language Learners further supports schools in their efforts to meet adequate yearly progress under the law. Much has been learned about literacy in the elementary grades, but less is known about programmatic approaches that help struggling adolescent readers acquire the skills they need to succeed in high school.

KEY POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS

Since 1998, the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) has captured the attention of many who are interested in reading and educational reform. ARI has become known for its clear, committed, and widespread focus on a deep-rooted problem for many students — namely, poor reading achievement.

The ARI involves several components, such as: schools becoming literacy demonstration schools and committing to a 100 percent student literacy rate; at least 85 percent of faculty and administration attending intensive summer institutes about reading improvement, as well as ongoing professional development throughout the school year; and appointing full-time reading coaches to work with teachers and struggling readers. Additionally, the program encourages collaboration between schools and higher education faculty partners and local businesses, to provide mentoring services and research and to help resolve instructional issues relating to literacy learning.

ARI's training for teachers helps them teach reading in proven and effective ways. The ARI approach is aligned with the National Reading Panel's findings regarding sound reading instruction built on scientifically based research wherein children are taught the following:

- Phonemic awareness skills — the ability to manipulate the sounds that make up spoken language
- Phonics skills — the understanding that there are relationships between letters and sounds
- The ability to read fluently with accuracy, speed, and expression
- To apply reading comprehension strategies to enhance understanding and enjoyment of what they read

Teachers involved in ARI gain an understanding of how children learn to read, why some children have difficulty learning to read, and how to implement proven instructional methods.

The Alabama Reading Initiative emphasizes intensive, extensive, and high-quality professional development designed to deliver information and skills to improve teachers' skills and reading instruction in the classroom. Although secondary schools tailored ARI to serve their students' and teachers' needs, the model has several key factors that were common across schools, which are featured in the following table:

Elements of the Alabama Reading Initiative
Reading Coaches Reading Specialists are recruited from within the school and externally. Their roles include: assisting teachers in learning and implementing new teaching strategies, making sure that student assessment takes place on a regular basis, mentoring struggling readers, and presenting new literacy concepts and ideas to school faculty.
85 Percent Faculty Participation in ARI One of the points ARI emphasizes is commitment to the Initiative by the entire school's staff. At least 85 percent of faculty is required to participate in ARI and a 10-13 day training program. This is followed up during the school year with support from reading specialists and consultants. ³

Elements of the Alabama Reading Initiative (continued)

School-Level Leadership Teams

School-level leadership teams follow procedures developed by ARI that include: grade-level data meetings, shared teachings, classroom observation and conference, walk throughs, school briefings, and self-assessment for school leaders.⁴

Administrator Partnerships

Administrator partnerships are established through the use of principal coaches, who provide professional development specifically for principals at ARI schools.

Teacher Collaboration

ARI provides teachers with more time to collaborate among their colleagues and learn from each others' teaching experiences in order to better understand why some students can adequately read while others fall behind.

Teacher Training

Among other things, ARI teacher training covers: language, development and vocabulary; phonics; comprehension strategies; printed concepts; reading and writing connections; formal and informal assessment; and effective interventions. It also includes access to constant support, the latest research, and practical demonstrations.⁵

Including Literacy Instruction Across the Curriculum

ARI participants reported that teachers were more aware of the importance of reading and ways to address students' reading difficulties, such as by monitoring reading, encouraging students to examine texts in more depth, and making students aware of the importance of reading. Teachers increasingly used more instructional strategies to address the individual needs of students and regularly tried new instructional approaches.

The ARI is unique in many ways. It is a collaborative effort with roots at the state rather than local level. The ARI is also unique among state efforts to address reading difficulties in its attention to the needs of secondary students who struggle with reading.

As a leader in the adolescent literacy movement, Carnegie Corporation of New York asked the American Institutes for Research to conduct a study of ARI in secondary schools. The resulting study focused primarily on ARI in middle and high schools. Its goals were to discover how secondary ARI was being successfully implemented and to identify obstacles to success. A further goal was to suggest how initiatives like ARI can be mounted in other states. To meet these goals, the American Institutes for Research undertook a qualitative study, using surveys, interviews, focus groups, and most specifically site visits to see ARI in action. From the descriptive data, the American Institutes for Research was able to uncover the theory of action that captures successful implementation of ARI and to suggest factors that have contributed or can contribute to its sustainability at the secondary level. Specifically, this report describes the following:

- *ARI as a secondary initiative:* the emergence of professional development and materials for secondary schools and the unique configurations of ARI in middle and high schools

- *Successes in ARI secondary schools:* changes in teaching, improvements in learning, and schoolwide transformations
- *Barriers to success and challenges for secondary ARI:* issues with leadership, support, funding, and material resources
- *Recommendations for sustainability:* changes that would add to the likelihood of continued and improved reform through secondary ARI

Following are the student and teacher outcomes revealed from the study of the secondary ARI.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

- Students demonstrated considerable engagement with reading and increased confidence in themselves as readers.
- Students seemed to be using ARI reading strategies independently.
- Students in ARI schools did better on standardized tests and on the Alabama Graduation Examination and seemed to be achieving more academically.
- ARI seemed to result in fewer referrals to special education and fewer discipline problems and in increased student use of school libraries.

Teachers and administrators stated that students in ARI schools were doing better on standardized tests and on the Alabama Graduation Examination and seemed to be achieving more academically. However, the contrasts between ARI and non-ARI schools have been most dramatic in the better resourced secondary schools — those where students have less far to climb as they reach academic success. The most significant achievement gains in ARI schools have been documented in the early grades (K-3) which benefit from a host of reading resources beyond just the ARI program.* What secondary ARI has managed to put in place in all of its schools are the precursors to dramatically enhanced student achievement — teachers who can now identify their students reading needs and are able to teach students how to be better readers across the curriculum. ARI stands to have that much more impact if it is more fully funded at the secondary school level and will be able to reach more than the 20 percent of secondary students it currently serves.

TEACHER OUTCOMES

- Teachers' philosophies reflected more awareness of the importance of reading and a personal responsibility to address students' reading difficulties.
- Teachers were increasingly aware of instructional practices that could help students read and achieve academically.
- Teachers were collaborating more than before ARI.
- Teachers were gathering and using data as a diagnostic tool for improved and more targeted instruction.

*Students enrolled in elementary ARI schools made dramatic improvement in reading proficiency according to research conducted by Edward Moscovitch in 2004-05. These improvements attest to the impact of the State's decisions to focus attention on early reading and to use its Reading First funding to further the spread of ARI. Approximately \$15,000,000 of Reading First funding goes directly to the 93 Alabama Reading First schools in 46 LEAs. This funding includes compliance with the federal guidelines for Reading First implementation and also sets aside at least \$1,000 per teacher for professional development. This judicious concentration of funding on early reading instruction in the most needy schools seems to be paying off. Between 2000 and 2003, a cohort of primarily elementary ARI schools (which joined the ARI in the fall of 2000) increased the percent of their students proficient by 4.5 percentage points – from 58.8 percent to 63.3 percent. The comparable gain for non-ARI schools over this period was 2.2 percent. The original 16 ARI schools raised proficiency rates by 8.8 percent over their 5 years in the program, compared to 3.1 percent for schools outside the program. ARI schools showed greater gains than non-ARI schools both for Black or Hispanic students and also for White or Asian students.⁶

LESSONS LEARNED

Following are the primary lessons learned from the study of the secondary ARI.

Lesson 1: Be responsive to the different needs of secondary and elementary students and schools—a one-size-fits-all approach won't work.

The ARI model, initially conceptualized as one-size-fits-all, proved to be responsive and flexible enough to accommodate content area teachers' needs. Teachers worked to make it their own so that they could meet their students' needs. They held separate professional development sessions for secondary teachers and tailored strategies and materials to accommodate a secondary-specific perspective. An inflexible model does not allow teachers and administrators to achieve the kind of ownership that motivates them to refine the model to fit their students' needs. Even though flexible, the model must emphasize to teachers the importance of using explicit comprehension strategies and provide teachers with clear direction on how to use them within their different content areas.

Lesson 2: Develop partnerships among teachers, administrators, and schools to create a coherent and well-defined K–12 continuum of reading instruction.

Although elementary and secondary ARI programs have emerged with unique characteristics and needs, a successful K–12 initiative must rest on a coherent continuum of reading instruction across the grades. This continuum will clearly articulate reading goals for students, “best practices” for teachers, and the ways these elements could be aligned and modified across the K–12 span.

The resource material provided to teachers seeks to codify not just the research-based “best practices” teachers should use but also a clear developmental continuum of literacy development teachers should be seeing as their students gain skills and strategies for addressing their reading and writing tasks. Additionally, ARI's large summer professional development sessions, the monthly regional and local meetings for teachers and reading coaches, and professional development efforts for principals have all sought to establish partnerships among educators that share a common framework for reading development and a common conviction that students can improve their skills.

It's important that secondary leaders identify where their literacy work begins in relation to elementary reading instruction and to collaborate with other grade levels. “[Secondary administrators] have to get out of the frame of mind that it's the elementary school's job to teach reading and that if [elementary schools] don't do it, it won't get done. It's all of our jobs. We have to make sure that the students can not only read and recognize words, but can also comprehend what they read,” noted one high school principal involved with ARI. Another secondary principal pointed out that, while ARI is an approach to secondary school, “Most high school teachers will admit that they are content teachers and don't have the strategies and skills to teach reading,” but that they can learn from partnerships with elementary school teachers. “The high school teachers can partner with elementary school teachers, and they can learn from them to be sure that they are being successful.”

Lesson 3: Provide secondary teachers and schools with consistent support from specialized staff.

Repeatedly, the data collected in interviews with teachers and administrators confirmed that adequate and consistent human resources are critical to the success of a secondary school's literacy initiative. These human resources — school and regional coaches, professional development providers, administrators at the state level — are most effective when they understand the particular needs of adolescent learners and the teachers who teach them specialized, content area subject matter.

LESSONS LEARNED (CONTINUED)

Lesson 4: Be attentive to the local, state, and national policy environment related to reading.

ARI administrators face an ongoing struggle to allocate funds and continue professional development related to Initiative approaches for teachers in grades 4 to 12. States and districts desiring to launch a secondary school literacy initiative are advised to be as attentive as possible to emerging federal as well as state funds available to support their efforts.

Lesson 5: Intensive Reading Programs should be available at the secondary level in addition to literacy across the curriculum initiatives.

Several years of implementation of secondary ARI have shown that even a well-developed initiative cannot erase deep-seated reading difficulties. Across the state, teachers and administrators said that they needed an intensive reading program for students in the middle and high schools: content area teachers can certainly become better skilled at helping students improve their ability to understand and learn from textbooks, but they cannot provide in-depth intervention. Nor should they be expected to do so. These students may have some basic reading skills, but they need help learning how to orchestrate existing skills and obtain new ones. Without such help, they will remain behind academically, still struggling to make sense out of school.

Lesson 6: Ensure that there is centralized leadership at the beginning, but encourage and support the emergence of local leaders.

It is important that leadership be centralized at the beginning, with educators who know the challenges of secondary education and respect the ways in which middle and high school teachers, students, and teaching practices differ from those in elementary schools. But that leadership must cede authority to district- and school-based leaders who have been nurtured and mentored in the tasks needed to localize the Initiative.

Lesson 7: Coordinate support from district and state administrators.

An overarching variable in implementation of ARI is coordinated support from district and state administrators. Such support might take more conventional forms, in terms of funds or personnel, or a less defined form, such as a policy climate for change. Coordinated support is envisioned to create an environment conducive to implementation of the Initiative without placing demands or burdens on the school. Interviewees suggested that coordination and support are imperative to sustain an initiative such as ARI. Many focused on the need for robust and long-term funding for the secondary Initiative, while in other cases, principals and teachers suggested that, with support at the district or state levels, elementary, middle, and high schools coordinate their view of reading. By developing a shared continuum of reading growth, ARI could be more effective in secondary schools for the simple reason that instruction had been more effective in elementary grades.

Lesson 8: Emphasize the importance of using explicit strategies for increasing comprehension and show how they can be applied in all content areas.

The research underpinning the ARI model emphasized the importance of systematic instruction in the skills and strategies for acquiring reading,* and it also affirmed the need for explicit instruction in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. ARI professional development sessions presented specific comprehension-enhancing strategies.

* These skills — phonemic awareness, phonics, and oral fluency — are the bedrock of Reading First. Although some students in middle and high schools need work with these basic skills and can definitely benefit from fluency practice, their needs are different from those of younger struggling readers.

LESSONS LEARNED (CONTINUED)

Lesson 9: Identify students who are most at risk for continued reading difficulties and provide intervention as early as possible; identifying which students are most at risk for reading difficulties as soon as possible enhances long-term reading outcomes.

Unfortunately, literacy teachers are often not well trained, instruction is not monitored, and procedures are insufficient for identifying students who should receive services. Furthermore, the interventions are often not targeted at what students really need: many do not need more drill on letter-sound correspondences but could benefit from a more integrated program acknowledging their adolescent needs and building skills that will transfer to their requirements in their regular coursework.

Lesson 10: Use data to inform instructional decisions.

The report notes that one of ARI's hallmarks is how it uses data to inform instructional decisions, also known as "progress monitoring." One principal commented on the increased use of data in one school: "The biggest thing...that ARI has done for us is to make us look at the research and the data that are available to us and structure our teaching around the data that available to us and [note] our strengths and weaknesses. As long as we continue to do that, we'll be successful. This year, the ARI people, actually the regional [reading coach], she was able to get me a printout of our student scores, a breakdown.... Those are the kind of things that ARI has made us do. It's made us analyze the data to cover where our weaknesses are."

Necessary Conditions for ARI Implementation

Certain conditions within the state, the school districts, and the schools themselves have enabled ARI to take root and survive at the local level. High Quality Professional Development, Effective Strategies, and School Buy-In are essential starting points for ARI implementation.

Ongoing professional development, professional community, human resources/leadership, and conventional resources — all influence how ARI is implemented at the school and classroom levels. In schools that evidenced a strong professional community, teachers, coaches, and administrators worked together to overcome lack of resources in order to make ARI successful.

The Bottom Line

Improvements in teacher awareness of reading and practice related to reading and improvements in students' reading achievement and their engagement with reading activities — these are ultimate goals of ARI. Teachers are central to the implementation of the Initiative, which is built on professional development that not only teaches strategies to integrate into their instruction but increases teacher awareness of and sense of responsibility for reading instruction for all students.

Caveats

As the national spotlight turns more toward the crisis in adolescents' reading, we may see changes in the ways that secondary ARI is acknowledged, funded, and supported. At the time of this study, however, responsibility for the maintenance of ARI — including funding — had fallen largely to the secondary schools themselves; and schools varied in the extent to which they were able to achieve and manipulate the conditions deemed essential for success.

Vignette A: Howard High School

Howard High School has a student population of fewer than 1,000, with approximately 60 percent White students and 40 percent African American students. The students represent a wide socioeconomic range, although the number of Howard students who receive free or reduced-price lunch is rising at a faster rate than in most other areas of

LESSONS LEARNED (CONTINUED)

Alabama. Students noted that the “teachers really care a lot about each student...they are willing to help you out.” The school has little funding to work with and has become more reliant on state and district funding after losing the financial support provided by a now-closed nearby mill.

Faculty at Howard have perceived ARI as a means of changing instruction while retaining the subject matter — the Initiative has changed how teachers teach. ARI strategies are embedded at Howard rather than overtly practiced due, in part, to the initial resistance from students which teachers experienced early in the implementation process. By using the ARI label infrequently and adapting ARI strategies to fit their subjects and methods of instruction, students now perceive the Initiative as “just part of what they do.” Additionally, faculty and administration at Howard recognize that ARI has provided some K–12 coherence among the elementary, middle, and high schools in the district, but there is still a lack of accountability — particularly among the lower grades — as many students continue to arrive at Howard unprepared for high school-level work.

Vignette B: Barry Middle School

Barry Middle School is located in a large city with a current student population that is primarily African American. The school is challenged by overcrowding — with close to 40 students in some classrooms. Still, the school is supported by the community, particularly a local business that provides resources and volunteers. The school district invited Barry to adopt ARI and provided funds for the school reading coach and support from a central office administrator for ARI, while Barry has been self-sufficient in implementing the rest of the Initiative.

Most teachers at Barry described the Initiative as a positive influence on their teaching, and several commented upon the new awareness of the need to stress reading and address reading difficulties, no matter what the subject matter. As one teacher noted, “What’s changed with me since being involved in ARI is it’s made me realize reading is not a separate subject. It’s got me bringing reading into my math class, making my children realize reading is an integral part of any subject.” Teachers and administrators have a similar goal for students’ learning — 100 percent literacy — and while ARI has served to augment faculty cohesiveness, communication and collaboration among teachers has not notably increased. Teachers tend to describe ARI in terms of individual classroom-level implementation, rather than schoolwide.

At Barry, the principal and school reading coach share leadership for ARI. The school reading coach supports teachers while keeping them engaged in the program, and “ensure[s] that the teachers are utilizing ARI strategies in their classrooms.” Because of increasing administrative demands, she is able to work only infrequently with small groups of students on reading interventions — a fact which several teachers noted: “We need another person. She does all she can, but we have such an overwhelming need that she can’t do it all.” Teachers and administrators recognize the need for additional funding and resources for ARI at Barry, particularly in the area of specific professional development for teachers and additional personnel for more classroom-level support.

END NOTES

1. Grigg, W. S., Daane, M. C., Jin, Y., & Campbell, J. R. (2003). *The nation's report card: Reading 2002* [Electronic version]. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2003-521). Retrieved September 20, 2006, from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2002/2003521.pdf>
2. Balfanz, R., McPartland, J. M., & Shaw, A. (2002). *Re-conceptualizing extra help for high school students in a high standards era*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.
3. Vaughan, A., & A+ Education Foundation. (2001). *Closing the gap: How the Alabama Reading Initiative is transforming reading instruction for all students* [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 6, 2006, from <http://www.aplusala.org/pdfs/closinggap.pdf>
4. Alabama Department of Education. (n.d.). Section V: Procedures and Tools. From *Alabama Reading Initiative Publications: Leadership Team Training Materials* [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 6, 2006, from [ftp://ftp.alsde.edu/documents/50/Section percent20V percent20Procedures percent20and percent20Tools.doc](ftp://ftp.alsde.edu/documents/50/Section%20V%20Procedures%20and%20Tools.doc). Alternative URL: <http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=50&sort=50&footer=sections>
5. Vaughan, A., & A+ Education Foundation. (2001). *Closing the gap: How the Alabama Reading Initiative is transforming reading instruction for all students* [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 6, 2006, from <http://www.aplusala.org/pdfs/closinggap.pdf>, p. 6
6. Moscovitch, E. (2004, August). *Evaluation of the Alabama Reading Initiative* [Electronic version]. Prepared for the Alabama State Department of Education. Cape Ann Economics. Retrieved September 6, 2006, from ftp://ftp.alsde.edu/documents/50/Evaluation_Year_5_and_6.doc

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For additional resources on how states and schools are implementing these and other best practices in the area of adolescent literacy, visit the following links:

- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2005, November). *Developing Research-Trained Educators: The South Carolina Reading Initiative. Case Study*. Retrieved July 26, 2006, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/SouthCarolinaReadingInitiative.pdf>
- Alliance for Excellent Education. (n.d.). Hialeah, Florida – Hialeah-Miami Lakes High School. *Case Study*. Retrieved July 26, 2006, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/Hialeah.html>
- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2005, December). *The Secondary Literacy Network in Colorado. Case Study*. Retrieved July 26, 2006, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ColoradoSecondaryLiteracyNetwork.pdf>
- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2005, December). *Six Key Strategies for Teachers of English Language Learners. Case Study*. Retrieved July 26, 2006, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/SixKeyStrategies.pdf>
- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2004, December). *Strategic Reading and the Talent Development Model. Case Study*. Retrieved July 26, 2006, from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext/StrategicReadingCaseStudy.pdf>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

Hamann, E. T., & Meltzer, J. (2005). Multi-Party Mobilization for Adolescent Literacy in a Rural Area: A Case Study of Policy Development and Collaboration. The Education Alliance, Brown University. Retrieved July 26, 2006, from http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/adlit/adrrl_mpmbzl.pdf

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